“Grape Expectations”

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Isaiah 5:1-7

Well. That’s uplifting.

Isaiah was a prophet, someone who spoke on God’s behalf and often as God’s own voice to the people. He was prophesying at a time of great political turmoil, a time of pending invasion and war, a time of precarious alliances and frantic grasps for safety.

Isaiah, like most prophets, had a hard word to deliver to God’s people:

“Turn, or perish. Stop what you are doing, as a people, as a nation, and turn back to God. Put aside what is happening in the world around you:

rumors of wars, threats of conspiracy and invasion, and trust in the Lord, trust that God is in control.”

Here’s the thing about prophets: no one really likes to listen to what they have to say, particularly *when* they are saying it. So we have the benefit of hearing Isaiah’s words today in the same way that most people *finally* heard them: knowing the whole story, knowing that the people didn’t turn, didn’t trust, and were hearing these words in a time of political and spiritual exile.

“Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning my vineyard.” Our story today begins with a love song. It is easy to forget this is a love song by the time we get to the end, what with all of the trampling and devouring. But it’s true – it’s a love song. The owner of the vineyard pours love and care and hard work into this vineyard.

I had the gift of living in a little slice of wine country in California’s central coast these past 7 years – Monterey County and down in Paso Robles produce some lovely pinot noirs and chardonnays.

In visiting some of our local wineries, I learned about the hard work of which the prophet speaks: finding a fertile hillside, digging and clearing, buying choice vines and investing in all the equipment needed to make wine, which is an incredible labor-intensive process in and of itself. And this isn’t a personal garden in someone’s backyard. This is a vineyard that will bear fruit—so people can eat, so people can drink. A vineyard doesn’t just benefit the gardener; it benefits the community. A harvest is too much for one person; an abundant harvest benefits others, and even prepares the ground for another season of successful planting. And the owner of this vineyard has clearly done everything that can be done to ensure that this vineyard will be a blessing, through turning seasons of abundance.

But, instead of delicious good grapes, wild grapes grow, instead. The vineyard doesn’t produce what it should. There is no abundant harvest.

Of course, this story isn’t really about grapes and the owner of a vineyard:

it’s about God and God’s people. And God expected that Israel, God’s chosen people, would be an abundance of blessing in the world. A harvest of justice and righteousness. But, despite all the tender, loving care lavished on the vineyard, wild grapes grew. Despite all the care and covenants and miracles, Israel turned away from God, again and again.

And aren’t we doing the same, still, today? We, who are loved and claimed and created in God’s own image, called to be a blessing, an abundant harvest for the world, we choose again and again to be wild grapes - bitter, inedible. Justice and righteousness are nowhere to be found.

Here’s the last verse of our passage again – verse 7: “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

Our English word justice in verse 7 is *mishpat* in Hebrew, which means to treat people equitably and give them their rights, particularly those with no social standing in the community. It has a legal sense to it, justice in judgment, by law. And the English word righteousness is the Hebrew word *tzadeqah*, and this word is very difficult to translate – it means both justice-and-charity. Tzedaqah is about the relationships we have with others, how justice plays out (or how it doesn’t) in our daily living.

In our Bible, these words are found typically in conjunction with particular classes of people – widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. These four groups of people in ancient society had no power or standing, and often were on the brink of starvation and homelessness, and so it was up to the rest of society to care of them. The law of God applied to every person in the community, and so it was up to the community to ensure that no one lost the rights given them under God’s law.

*Mishpat* and *tzedakah*, according to our Bible, mean taking up the cause and care of these vulnerable people. Refusing to care for the poor and needy was not just a matter of charity, of tzedakah, but a violation of mishpat, of legal justice.

Justice and righteousness are not just characteristics of God’s covenant community, they are attributes of God. God is just and righteous in God’s own nature, and therefore is a lover and defender of justice and righteousness in human society. God expects justice and righteousness, mishpat and tzedaqah. Verse 7 – God expected justice, *mishpat* – but saw violence. And God expected righteousness, *tzedaqah* – but heard anguish and suffering. This is a love song, and God’s heart is broken.

So what is to be done with a people who refuse God’s love and care, God’s good gifts and blessings, or who receive it, and refuse to share it, to pass it along?

Listen again to the middle of the love song:

“And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;

I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,

and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns;

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.”

Isaiah told Israel in no uncertain terms that the people can continue to choose to be wild grapes, living for themselves only, instead of pursuing justice and righteousness, but if they do, God is going to let them have at it.

By the time these words were being read and heard regularly, the people of Israel had been attacked, invaded, and sent into exile. They had seen the truth of Isaiah’s words. They knew what it meant to live in the midst of great devastation, destruction, and waste.

These words from Isaiah feel a little like, “I told you so.”

“You want to be wild?” asks God. “Fine, I’ll take down the hedge and the wall and you can run wild.” This story is a familiar one if you read through the pages of our Old Testament: Again and again, we read that “Israel sinned and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and the Lord delivered them into the hands of their enemies.”

“I told you so” rarely feels helpful in the midst of whatever unfortunate circumstance you find yourself in. Sometimes, we have an awful lot to do with the mess in which we’ve ended up. Sometimes, the mess is entirely out of our control; pain and brokenness exist in the world and will continue to exist until Jesus comes back to wipe away every tear.

Isaiah points out that whatever the circumstances, our response to God matters. Our response - or lack thereof - can break God’s heart. At the end of the day, the Israelites were still in exile. And for us reading this passage this morning, our world still feels like a pretty messed up place, with the climate crisis, incredible wealth disparity, class division, racial injustice, and divisive partisanship, all of which is made worse by this ongoing pandemic that now has killed over 200,000 Americans – including 7,000 Georgians – 1 million people worldwide.

Like the Israelites, we cannot change what has already happened. We cannot change the particular historic reality in which we find ourselves. We cannot change the ways we have been complicit in the violence and the anguished cries that break God’s heart. This is the world in which we must live today. This is the world in which we will live tomorrow, and the day after. Which is *good news*.

We will live in this world tomorrow, and next week, and next month, and next year. We make a choice – today – about what that looks like. We can name the ways we have failed and broken God’s heart, we can confess, to God and to one another, and in receiving the assurance of God’s grace and forgiveness, we can commit to work on mishpat and tzedaqah, justice and righteousness, equity and charity, perhaps first by naming it as God’s work to be done, as God’s work for us to pick up again. We can choose to be good grapes, instead of wild grapes, we can claim for ourselves *and for others* the care and love God has lavished on each one of us.

Despite all the times that we turn away from God’s call to be a blessing in the world, God is still singing a love song for us. We can *choose* to be a harvest of God’s justice and righteousness.

We, as a church family, have already been doing this. We are not perfect, no human institution is, but Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church is intentional about sharing our abundance with people who are hungry and thirsty and in need. We are feeding our community through the Little Free Pantry, the Duluth Co-Op, and Clifton Sanctuary Ministries – through this pandemic we are working to ensure no one goes hungry in our community.

Through our Laundry Love ministry, we provide free quarters for laundry for our neighbors, and are working to continue to do so safely. We aren’t overlooking our neighbors’ welfare and the greater good of our community – we wear masks, we don’t gather in large groups, we stay home when we can, even when the rest of the country would convince us it doesn’t matter. It does matter. You have built homes and provided clean water for communities near and far on mission trips, and will once again. You care for one another with a fierce compassion, checking in on the lonely, the isolated, and the sick.

But – this is a story that needs to be told again and again. This love song – the song of God’s broken heart - for a vineyard of wild grapes bears repeating. Every day, we have to decide again to be about God’s justice and righteousness. Every day, we have to decide again to work for the benefit of our neighbors.

Each one of us has been planted and tended by God the gardener, called to be good grapes, to be a part of an abundant harvest, blessing those around us. There are many and varied opportunities to join in this harvest,

even in the midst of a pandemic.

Get involved in our hunger ministries by donating food. We have another drive-thru opportunity for you at the end of this month. Talk to Sara Woolley or anyone else on Mission and Outreach Committee. Plan to volunteer in person once health and safety permit, or respond to one of the opportunities we have now, if you’re able. Talk to Shawn Badinger if you can help with Laundry Love. Serve your church family by praying for individuals on the prayer chain. Contact Shannon Hudson to sign up for those emails if you don’t get them already.

You can also serve your church family by picking up the phone and calling folks who are feeling the strain of this time of isolation and quarantine. Talk to Pastor Jody if you don’t know where to start.

Consider increasing your pledge if you’re able when Stewardship rolls around in a couple weeks so that our church can more fully serve God by serving others.

Be a presence in a child’s life by sending handwritten notes in the mail, or reach out to parents and promise to pray for their family daily. Pastor Jennie can help you make a connection.

Participate in a Bible study or small group – online or in person – to discern and discuss in community how to bear fruit of justice and righteousness in your life within and outside of PHPC.

In this digital time, sign up for a conference or a free webinar, or even find a YouTube video to learn something about a pressing issue in our society from an expert to whom you’d otherwise never have access, and consider how you will respond as a person of faith. Find someone who thinks differently than you do, and seek some common ground – on what *can* you agree? What might you learn from one another, and how might you respect one another’s humanity – the image of God in you both – in the midst of disagreement?

Share whatever you have – money, time, ideas, power and privilege, physical goods, talents and passions, kindness. Work to change the circumstances of those who do not have as much as you, or as much as they need. Justice and righteousness. Mishpat and tzedaqah.

Grapes don’t grow overnight, and neither do mishpat and tzedaqah. It takes a long time, a lifetime of discipleship, sometimes, to see the fruit of those labors.

Know that God the gardener is still at work. God the gardener has never and will never abandon us, wild though we may grow. God the gardener is still singing a love song.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.